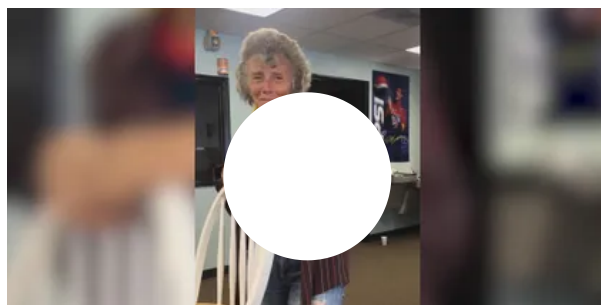


Green Bay Packers co-founder Curly Lambeau's Belgian roots explored in Door County exhibit

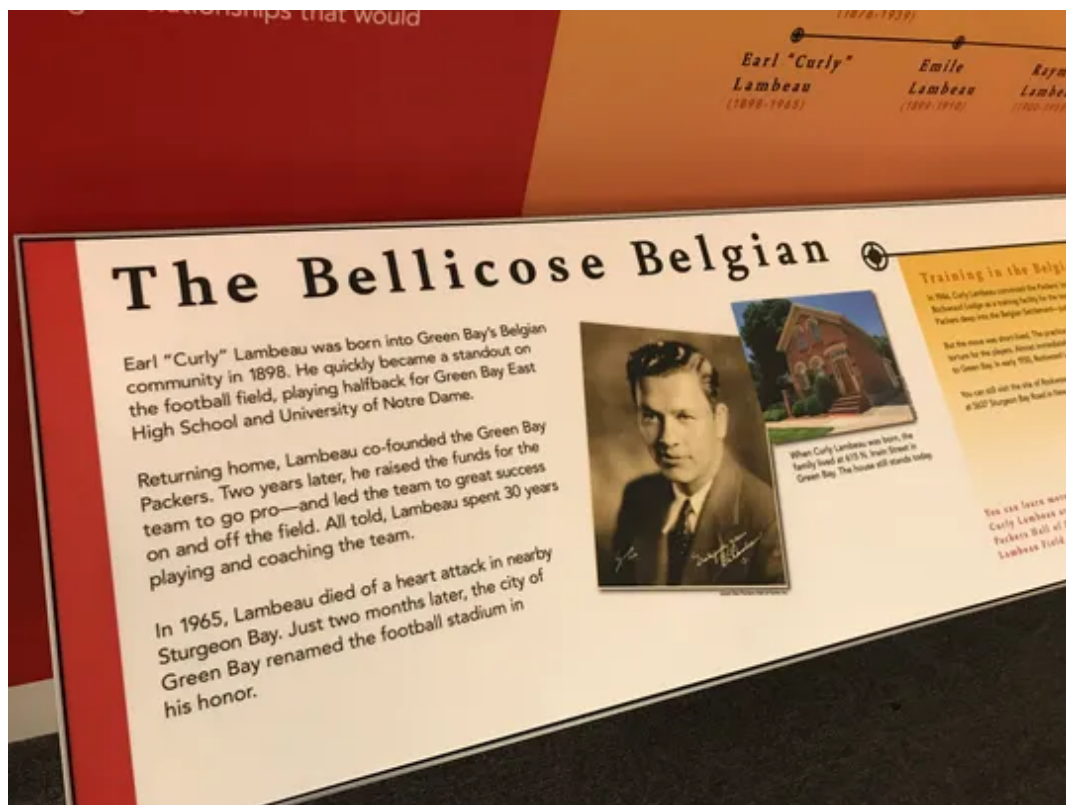
CHRISTOPHER CLOUGH NOVEMBER 04, 2019



BRUSSELS - Green Bay Packers fans, if you think you've seen everything there is to see about Earl "Curly" Lambeau, the Belgian Heritage Center in Door County might have something new for you.

Lambeau's life, accomplishments and legacy have been featured in museums and football halls of fame across the country, as well as in books and other football-related media over the years. That'll happen when you co-found one of the most successful and renowned franchises in sports history, as well as lead it to six NFL championships in 30 years as coach/general manager and play halfback in its early days.

But to Bill Chaudoir's knowledge, no museum exhibit has explored Lambeau's genealogy, beyond mentioning in passing that his parents were of Belgian descent.



That changes when the Belgian Heritage Center opens an exhibit on Lambeau's roots, timed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Packers in 1919, with a special dedication Saturday.

Titled "The Bellicose Belgian," it not only traces whence his family came, but also includes artifacts related to Lambeau's football career that normally aren't seen in public. It also includes information on Rockwood Lodge, which the Packers bought at Lambeau's direction from the local Norbertine Order in 1946 to play permanent host to the team's preseason training camps, the first such site in professional football.

The opening event features programs by respected Packers historian and author Cliff Christl, who will talk about Lambeau's work founding the team, and Kevin Cullen, deputy director of the Neville Public Museum in Green Bay, who is leading an archaeological dig at the site of Rockwood

Lodge, which burned down in 1950 and was located on the grounds of what is now Bay Shore Park north of Green Bay.

Also, Mary Jane (Van Duyse) Sorgel, the original Packers Golden Girl and Lambeau's girlfriend when he died while mowing the lawn at her Sturgeon Bay home in 1965, is planning to be on hand for the ceremony. Christl will sell and sign copies of his 2017 book, "Packers Heritage Trail."

And, befitting an event at the Belgian center, or a Packers tailgate party, booyah will be served along with refreshments including Belgian-style beer.

Chaudoir, a board member of the heritage center and chairman of the committee that put together this exhibit, said he's not aware of any other exhibit, now or before, that focused on Lambeau's ancestry.



He believes it will find an audience with Packers fans — the team has a home game Sunday, the day after the dedication, against the Carolina Panthers — and folks of Belgian descent, not just from the large percentage of Belgian-Americans in and around Door County, but from all over.

Also, those who can't come to the dedication ceremony can see the exhibit any time the center is open, because it's a permanent exhibit. The football-related artifacts are on loan on a year-to-year basis from the Green Bay Packers Hall of Fame, but Chaudoir said because the hall normally doesn't display them, this exhibit likely is the first and only chance for most people to see them.

"Our artifacts are unique, not on display anywhere else," Chaudoir said. "It tells the story of his Belgian roots. Anybody who might be interested in his ancestry would be interested in this."



The idea for such an exhibit came to Chaudoir from a passing comment by Barb Chisholm, the center's historian.

"(Chisholm) mentioned to me a couple years ago that Lambeau had Belgian heritage," Chaudoir said, "and I thought, 'My god, I didn't know that, we've got to do something about it.'"

Chisholm and Sue Havel, "kind of a genealogy expert" for the center in Chaudoir's words, researched Lambeau's ancestry while Chaudoir's committee set about raising the \$15,000 needed to put together the exhibit. Helping with some research was Split Rock Studios, a St. Paul-based company that creates exhibits for museums, zoos, parks and more; the center hired Split Rock to design and assemble the Lambeau display.

Besides the Lambeau football memorabilia, the exhibit features a plaque showing Curly Lambeau is a second-generation Belgian-American. Both of his sets of grandparents came from villages in the Walloon region in the central part of the old country, with paternal grandfather Victor Lambeau emigrating from Hamme-Mille to Green Bay and maternal grandfather Louis LaTour from Mehaigne with his large family to start a farm in Door County.

Chaudoir toured Belgium last fall and visited Hamme-Mille as well as areas that spawned families now in Door County. He said the communities in that part of the region are generally just a few miles apart, and the Lambeau name appears on cemetery headstones along with Belgian names that would be familiar to Door County locals.

"The amazing thing is, where a lot of the ancestors come from, it's all very close together," Cahudoir said. "You go through the cemeteries there, all the names you see are the same names you see here."

The football memorabilia on loan from the Packers Hall of Fame includes a drinking glass with Lambeau's face painted on, a game program from 1928 featuring a photo of him, a Packers matchbook about 18 inches long from the Lambeau days, and a plaque given to him that calls him the "Bellicose Belgian." Also, Mark Wagner, former 40-year director of ticket operations for the Packers and a Southern Door resident, donated a portrait of Lambeau that was given to him when he learned about the exhibit.

Once the artifacts and plaques were ready to be assembled into the exhibit, Chaudoir said Christl was consulted to make sure it told Lambeau's story properly.

"We had him review the script of what's being presented in the exhibit, and he gave it his stamp of approval," Chaudoir said.

Chaudoir and Chisholm said they weren't 100-percent sure how much Lambeau was connected to his heritage, but Chaudoir guesses he was.

"All I can really comment on," Chaudoir said, "is, if you saw one of the plaques in the exhibit ... awarded to him by a sports organization in the 1960s, the fact that it's titled 'The Bellicose Belgian' tells us he was pretty proud of his heritage. He put (those words) on his shirt sleeves for everyone to see."

One thing that's certain is Chaudoir is proud to share the same roots as the man who was the driving force behind the what's arguably the world's most iconic sports franchise, and he hopes other Belgians and Belgian-Americans feel the same way.

"I think it's pretty neat that the co-founder of the Green Bay Packers, undoubtedly one of the organizations that put Green Bay and Northeast Wisconsin on the world map, is one of us," Chaudoir said. "I'm very proud of that. I think we all can be proud of that."

"The Bellicose Belgian," an exhibit celebrating Green Bay Packers founder Curly Lambeau's Belgian heritage, opens with a special event from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 9, at the Belgian Heritage Center (the former St. Mary of the Snows Church), 1255 County DK, Brussels. Packers historian and author Cliff Christl and Neville Public Museum Deputy Director Kevin Cullen give talks starting at 1 p.m. Booyah, bread and refreshments will be served throughout the day, including Walloon Witbier from Badger State Brewing in Green Bay.

The Belgian Heritage Center is open Fridays through Sundays from May through October and by appointment from November through April. For more information, call 920-825-1199 or visit belgianheritagecenter.org.

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